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SUBJECT: DEMOCRACY AND STABILITY IN CHAD: IS THERE HOPE?

REF: NDJAMENA 553

Classified By: Ambassador Marc Wall for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: President Idriss Deby Itno is a master survivor in a political culture as cruel and a neighborhood as dangerous as any in the world. Over the course of the last few years he has succeeded once again in facing down all challengers despite the fierce backlash his move to become president-for-life unleashed. Deby is often seen as all there is between relative calm and the abyss. But I would argue that a durable peace in Chad will only come from democratic reforms that include respecting arrangements for the peaceful transfer of presidential power. In a country as ethnically fragmented, weakly governed, and conflict-prone as Chad, there is always the risk of turmoil. But without these reforms, that risk is compounded. This matters to us. An unstable Chad will not be able to cooperate effectively on Darfur, counter-terrorism, oil, and humanitarian relief. Only by addressing Chad's democratic deficit will it ever break the cycle of violence that has plagued it for most of its history and prevents it now from being a reliable partner with us on the important issues at stake in this troubled part of the world. END SUMMARY

12. (SBU) This is the second in a two-part account of a departing ambassador's three years in Chad. A previous message (ref) looked at the mixed record we have had in pursuing our goals. This message examines the insurgency in eastern Chad and the challenge of promoting democracy and stability in a country that has known little of either.

Insurgency and Survival

13. (SBU) For much of the last two years, hardly a month has gone by without bloody clashes taking place between Chadian army units and rebel forces along the eastern border with Sudan. Some were hit-and-run raids with few casualties; others were much larger and deadlier confrontations. All the main border towns, including Abeche, the base for humanitarian operations, have at one time or another fallen into rebel hands. Some rebel assaults advanced deep inside the country, including on April 13 last year in the streets of the capital city. Counter-attacks have taken Chadian forces into Sudanese territory, most worrisomely in an engagement last April that left 17 Sudanese troops dead.

14. (SBU) Deby has used all his formidable skills as a desert fighter to withstand the attacks by the Chadian rebels. Oil money has given him the means to arm his forces, and the French military has intervened to support him at crucial moments. But Deby is alive and in power today because of his own courage as a field commander, wiliness as a tactician, and audacity as a deal-maker. As he has proven throughout

his 17 tumultuous years in power and before that as army commander or rebel coup plotter, he always ends up the last man standing. If he cannot defeat his enemies in battle, he buys them off or uses local ethnic-based militias to subdue them. Deby's methods have produced such strange results as naming the rebel leader who assaulted N'Djamena last year Minister of Defense and turning his 9,000 followers into the bastion of Deby's defense forces. They also led Deby to throw his support behind the Sudanese rebel forces inside Chad in exchange for their willingness to intervene in his defense against his Chadian enemies.

A Chadian Rebellion with Chadian Roots

¶5. (SBU) Khartoum has provided support for these rebels, as it did for Deby when he was plotting his return to overthrow the Habre regime over 1989-90. Now, as then, the rebels receive sanctuary inside Sudan as well as financing and materiel help. But contrary to Deby's strident claims, they are not a mercenary army hatched by Khartoum. On the contrary, the roots of this insurgency are Chadian. The commanders of the various rebel factions are senior Deby family members or former government ministers or army officers; the foot soldiers are largely young Chadian recruits, often defectors from the Chadian army.

¶6. (SBU) Chad has lived with insurgencies virtually since its independence from France in 1960, but for much of Deby's tenure rebel activity slacked off somewhat. That relative calm was shattered in 2005. A virulent insurgency sprang up in reaction to his refusal to abide by the constitutional term limits that would have required him to step down in

NDJAMENA 00000557 002 OF 003

¶2006. Despite statements in 2001 that he had no intention of doing so, he set in motion the steps that would enable him to stay on in power as president-for-life. The ruling party's decision to accede to his ambitions in late 2003 opened the first cracks in his support base. It was then that the defections began and intra-clan feuds intensified. Hardly anyone voted in the referendum to overturn the presidential term limits in June 2005, but the results were nevertheless proclaimed as a popular endorsement for the constitutional change. The organized rebel attacks began soon after.

International Efforts Yield Disappointing Response

7, (C) With the exception of a statement by a visiting French minister in 2004 supporting Deby's third term ambitions and one by me at the July 4 reception in 2005 taking exception to his tactics, the international community was silent. There was concern not to get out in front of the French or to put pressure on Deby that could have negative effects on the Darfur peace efforts in Abuja. After the election in May 2006, which brought Deby a resounding but false victory, greater international pressure began to build. Nothing significant came of these efforts. Deby ignored appeals to postpone the elections. A national dialogue he organized for parties loyal to him was derided by his opposition. Our press statement expressing disappointment over the conduct of the presidential elections barely resonated. The Secretary's letter suggesting Deby consider handing over power at the end of his third term drew a stiff rebuke. Only in recent months have discussions started with EU support that may lead to credible electoral reforms before the next legislative elections.

Is Peace Possible in Chad?

¶8. (C) Perhaps the French are right. Perhaps, as a

well-placed official once told me with refreshing Gallic cynicism, Deby is the leader of the gang that controls the capital city. In this view Chad is too divided and politically immature to be capable of effective governance. No other conceivable leader could do any better job holding such a conflict-prone country together. In fact, a successor would likely be even more autocratic or else much less capable of preventing collapse. Outsiders should do nothing that could weaken Deby's hand. Any well-intentioned meddling would only make the situation worse, potentially much worse.

¶9. (SBU) But I believe on balance this view is wrong. Other countries in the region with pasts almost as troubled as Chad's have succeeded in finding ways to hand power over peacefully. The great majority of Chadians, still remembering the horrors of the civil war that ravaged the country from 1979 through much of the 1980's, has no desire to repeat that past. As ineffectual as they seem now, some of the opposition party leaders are impressive individuals who in a political environment less dominated by a powerful strong man would have the makings of being credible contenders for leadership. The longer Deby hangs on to power, the bigger a target he becomes and the more he galvanizes his opponents against him. And even if one buys the argument that a future without Deby is bound to be chaotic does not mean it can be prevented indefinitely. Better to put a process in place now that has some chance of leading to a peaceful political transition than waiting for the violence that will almost surely erupt when he dies or is overthrown.

But What Can Outsiders Do?

¶10. (C) Even if the French (at least the French under Chirac) are wrong, what can well-meaning outsiders do about it? Deby is a proud, thin-skinned leader who fiercely resists outside pressure. The international community is too divided to put concerted pressure on him. Even though France under its new regime might now be readier to join in efforts to do so, Deby has vast experience maneuvering around critics internally and would have little problem doing so with outsiders. But even if we could get to him in ways that might make a difference, would we even want to? Deby is a strong man who wants to be our friend. He takes stands in many areas that support our interests. He wants to cooperate with us on counter-terrorism, has no patience with religious extremism, supports the relief effort for Sudanese refugees, and on balance backs efforts to stop the violence in Darfur.

NDJAMENA 00000557 003 OF 003

He has proven willing to give his consent to our requests on specific issues. He would not take kindly to attempts to push him harder on democratic change.

The Imperative of Democratic Reform

¶11. (C) However compelling the case is for more democracy, the reality is that an array of more immediate interests will tend to take precedence for us. But the conundrum is that without more democracy Chad will never break the cycle of violence perpetrated by those convinced they have no way of addressing their grievances or changing their leaders through a credible political process. The discussions now underway on electoral reform, together with the recent round of talks in Tripoli with leaders of the Chadian rebellion, may prove to be initial steps toward addressing these failures. Given Deby's past track record, skeptics have reason to view these initiatives as just more gestures to make him look good before his domestic opponents and international critics. Deby's powers of ruthlessness and guile could see him through for years to come, but it is a high-risk game. He will ultimately fall, either from natural or other causes, and his

country will suffer in the aftermath. Until durable reforms take root, including respecting arrangements for handing power over peacefully and constitutionally, Chad is doomed to repeat its history of autocratic rule and violent regime change.

¶12. (SBU) An unstable Chad is not in our interest; in fact, it is a potential nightmare. Chad cannot be a reliable partner with us if the regime is constantly struggling for survival against armed insurgencies. It will not be able to work with us effectively to strengthen its defenses against terrorists and extremists; it will not be able to manage its oil revenues for the benefit of its poor; it will not be able to work constructively on Darfur; and it will not be able to provide safehaven to Sudanese refugees or avoid adding to its own displaced population.

¶13. (SBU) To address the roots of that instability, we must do more to support efforts to improve governance in this notoriously poorly governed country. We should be prepared to work with others on reforming its electoral process, improving oil revenue management, and making its military more professional. But we should also let Deby know that as much as we appreciate his cooperation in many areas, we believe he should lend his support for a peaceful, democratic transition when his term in office ends in 2011.
WALL